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SUBJECT: Successful Step in Improving Military Cooperation

¶1. (U) Summary: The visit of two USAF F-16s on June 22 and 23 marked a new high point in the military relationship between the US and Serbia. The extensive and overwhelmingly positive media coverage made the operation a success and demonstrates the effect that military cooperation can have on changing attitudes and perceptions for the better. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The three-day JCTP event began on June 21 with the arrival of American maintenance, fuels, and security personnel to Batajnica Airfield to ensure the suitability of the location for the visiting aircraft and to provide hands-on demonstrations in their areas of expertise to their Serbian counterparts. The F-16s left Aviano Air Base the following morning, and were met with two Serbian MiG 21 aircraft at the border, as previously arranged, to be escorted to Batajnica. Numerous media outlets covered the landings. An official viewing followed on June 23 with guests including the US Ambassador and Serbian Minister of Defense, which saw strong media presence.

¶3. (U) The main purpose of this event was to publicize the ongoing cooperation of the two militaries and present both the American and the Serbian forces in a positive light. The overwhelmingly favorable media images resulting from the event made it a success. The positive media response is particularly noteworthy considering the recent history of F-16s being involved in offensive operations in Serbia (and the fact that one of the pilots had taken part in the 1999 NATO operations over Serbia). Negative press coverage was mainly limited to remarks from radical politicians and one daily (Glas Javnosti), who referenced the incident of the young girl killed by an F-16 offensive during the NATO operations of 1999. However, the prevalence of positive reporting outweighed the negative, and has hopefully done much to improve the image of the US military in Serbia. Due to memories of the NATO campaign of 1999, positive images of the US military in particular can play a key role in changing attitudes towards America.

¶4. (U) Comment: Against the backdrop of the 1999 NATO campaign, military relations with the US are still somewhat touchy -- President Tadic reneged on an earlier agreement to take part in the public event, for instance. Nevertheless, the suprisingly positive media response highlights the especially good relations with the Serbian Air Force, with which we have the most constructive relations among the Serbian military (including high levels of willingness to share information). We are hopeful that this visit and similar events will compel other military branches to be equally cooperative. End comment.

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